Energy Flash

"My purpose was simple: to catch the feel, the pulse of rock, as I had lived through it. What I was after was guts, and flash, and energy, and speed" - NIK COHN - ---------- "When the music was new and had no rules" -LUNA C

Tuesday, November 3, 2009

RENEGADE ACADEMIA: THE Cybernetic Culture Research Unit
director's cut of unpublished feature for *Lingua Franca*, 1999; short remix appeared in *Springerin*, 2000

by Simon Reynolds

Smack in the middle of the United Kingdom, Leamington Spa is like a less picturesque Bath--genteel, sedate, irredeemably English in a Masterpiece Theater sort of way. But the town has darker undercurrents: Aleister Crowley was born here in 1875, and today it's home to a mysterious entity called Cybernetic Culture Research Unit. Now in its third year of existence, CCRU's institutional status is, to say the least, disputed. Which is why its membership is currently holed up in an office on The Parade (Leamington's main street), rather than working c/o the Philosophy Department of Warwick University a few miles away, as was the case the last academic year.

Since my knowledge of CCRU stems from its disorientating textual output--the journal Abstract Culture--plus a few wilfully opaque email communiques, I've scant idea what I'll encounter after pressing the button marked 'Central Computer'. Inside CCRU's top-floor HQ above The Body Shop, I find three women and four men in their mid to late twenties, who all look reassuringly normal. The walls, though, are covered with peculiar diagrams and charts that hint at the breadth and bizareness of the unit's research.

But before I can enquire further, I'm entreated to sit in the middle of three ghettoblasters. CCRU have prepared a re-enactment of a performance-cum-reading given at their Virotechnics conference in October 1997. The first cassette-player issues a looped cycle of words that resembles an incantation or spell. From the second machine comes a text recited in a baleful deadpan by a female American voice--not a presentation but a sort of prose-poem, full of imagery of "swarmachines" and "strobing centipede flutters". The third ghettoblaster emits what could either be Stockhausen-style electroacoustic composition or the pizzicato, mandible-clicking music of the insect world. Later, I find out it's a human voice that's been synthetically processed, with all the vowels removed to leave just consonants and fricatives.

Even without the back-projected video-imagery that usually accompanies CCRU audio, the piece is an impressively mesmeric example of what the unit are aiming for--an ultra-vivid amalgam of text, sound, and visuals designed to "libidinise" that most juiceless of academic events, the lecture. CCRU try to pull off the same trick on the printed page. Their "theory-fiction" is studded with neologisms, delirious with dystopian cyberpunk imagery, and boasts an extravagantly high concentration of ideas per sentence. Bearing the same distillate relation to its sources (Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Paul Virilio,William Gibson) that crack does to cocaine, CCRU-text offers an almighty theory-rush.

What CCRU are striving to achieve is a kind of nomadic thought that--to use the Deleuzian term--"deterritorializes" itself every which way: theory melded with fiction, philosophy cross-contaminated by natural sciences (neurology, bacteriology, thermodynamics, metallurgy, chaos and complexity theory, connectionism). It's a project of monstrous ambition. And that's before you take into account the the most daring deterritorialisation of all--crossing the thin line between reason and unreason. But as they say, later for that.

Founded in the 1960s, Warwick rapidly became the epitome of a modern university.
Through the early to mid Seventies, the university was rife with militancy--not just student unrest, but discontent amongst the staff (70 percent of whom at one point gave a vote of no confidence in

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simonreynoldswriter at gmail dot com
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► 2016 (129)

the Vice Chancellor). Socialist historian E.P.Thompson was a "thorn in the side of the adminstiration", recalls one Warwick veteran, and eventually left because he wasn't given the Labour History Unit he was promised. At the same time, Warwick was ahead of its time in terms of seeking corporate funding, such that by the mid-Eighties Margaret Thatcher could describe it as her favourite university. "Warwick University Inc." (as E.P. Thompson titled a book) is financially buoyant compared with other British universities, and well prepared for any future withdrawal of government funding that may be up the current Labour administration's sleeve.

Warwick also has a very modern Philosophy Department. It is Britain's largest graduate school in philosophy outside Oxford, with about 120 postgraduate and masters students, and a similar number of undergraduates. The majority are lured by the department's reputation as the country's leading center for Continental Philosophy. Events like the October 1997 "DeleuzeGuattari and Matter" seminar and "Going Australian", a February 1988 conference devoted to the new school of Australian feminist philosophy, indicate the kind of work going on at Warwick. It is to this cutting edge Philosophy Department to which CCRU was linked in a fatally ambigous fashion.

In a typically gnomic e-mail, CCRU outlined its history. "Ccru retrochronically triggers itself from October 1995, where it uses Sadie Plant as a screen and Warwick University as a temporary habitat. ...Ccru feeds on graduate students + malfunctioning academic (Nick Land) + independent researchers +.... At degree-O Ccru is the name of a door in the Warwick University Philosphy Department. Here it is now officially said that Ccru does not, has not, and will never exist'. " CCRU sees itself as the academic equivalent of Kurtz, the general in Apocalypse Now who used unorthodox methods to achieve superior results than the tradition-bound US military. CCRU claim that its frenzied interdisciplinary activity embarrassed the Philosphy Dept, resulting in the termination of the unit. Just as Kurtz disappeared "up river" into the Vietnamese jungle, the CCRU have strategically withdrawn to their operational base above the Body Shop.

"There is no conspiracy, it's so pedestrian," insists Professor Andrew Benjamin, Director of Graduate Studies at Warwick's Philosophy Department. Benjamin is a well-respected post-structuralist scholar with numerous books to his name. As editor of the Warwick Studies in Philosophy (the best-selling Continental Philosophy series in the English language), he's responsible for anthologies like The Difference Engineer: Deleuze & Philosophy Audibly beaming with pride, the Australia-born Benjamin talks up Warwick as "an incredibly fabulous philosphy dept where Deleuzians lie down with Derrideans, and even lie down with analytic philosphers. Basically, there isn't any postmodern crap done here, it's quite rigorous stuff."

According to Benjamin, CCRU was originally set up for Dr Sadie Plant, freshly recruited from Birmingham University to be a Research Fellow attached to Warwick's Faculty of Social Science. But the unit--organised around her interests in cyber-theory and involving a number of postgraduate students she'd brought over from Birmingham--was initially tied to the Philosophy Department, owing to Plant's particular interests, like Deleuze & Guattari. The plan was for the unit to become an independent, freestanding entity, with the postgrads registered as CCRU rather than philosophy students. But Dr Plant unexpectedly quit her job March 1997, before the paperwork was completed. The university decided to wind CCRU down, with Plant's main ally at Warwick, Nick Land, taking over her role as Director for the unit's final year of official existence.

But when Benjamin elaborates on the procedural intricacies, it's easy to empathise with CCRU's paranoia. "See, there isn't such a thing as the CCRU," he insists. "Within the university system you can set up a thing called a center for research, then you take the planned center to various committees and put it through this system in whose terms that center would be legitimised, have an external committee overseeing standards, et cetera. Because Sadie left early, that procedure didn't happen. Officially, you would then have to say that CCRU didn't ever exist. There is, however, an office about 50 metres down the corridor from me with CCRU on the door, there's a group of students who meet there to have seminars, and to that extent, it it is a thriving entity. Informally, it did exist, still does, lots of things go on under its aegis. But that office will disappear at the end of the year. A number of students thought there was a conspiracy, there's a lot of gossip and carry-on, but the fact is--had Sadie decided to pursue an academic career, CCRU would have been a viable, ongoing entity."

Thin as rake in her brown leather jacket, dragging on a Camel Light, Sadie Plant looks every bit the cyberpunkette. Currently, she's the most famous "media academic" in Britain--writing for quality newspapers, pontificating on the famous BBC Radio programme "Start The Week" (a sort of highbrow Howard Stern) alongside Gore Vidal and Martin Amis. Plant's elevation to intellectual celebrity status began well before the late 1997 publication of her acclaimed Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture. Although she's far from happy with the marketing of Zeros as a Nineties cyberfeminist equivalent to The Female Eunuch, there are striking parallels between Plant and Germaine Greer (who taught at Warwick's English department before quitting to write Eunuch). "When I went to see the Vice Chancellor about leaving, he said 'I don't believe it, Germaine Greer

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► 2012 (180)
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► September (4)
► August (1)
► July (2)
► June (4)
► May (4)
► April (1)
► March (6)
► February (2)
► January (6)
► 2008 (54)
► 2007 (3)

pulled this on us as well'", says Plant, flashing her buck-toothed smile.

We're in a cafe in Birmingham, the industrial Midlands metroplis where Plant grew up and where she returned after quitting Warwick.The way Sadie tells it, she never really wanted to be an academic in the first place, but just fell into a university career. After transforming her Manchester University philosophy PhD on Situationism into The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International In A Postmodern Age, Plant accepted a Lecturer's position at Birmingham University's Department of Cultural Studies. Back in the Seventies, when it was called Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies, the department was a vibrant place, home of the "resistance through rituals" school of neo-Gramscian subcultural theory (Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, Stuart Hall, et al). But the CCCS spirit was long gone by the time Plant arrived. The only redeeming aspect was the undergraduate and graduate students, who shared Plant's enthusiasm for rave culture and digital technology.

Plant was on the verge of quitting academia for good, when the opportunity of a Research Fellowship at Warwick presented itself in 1995. Warwick was already a cyber-theory hotbed, what with its 1994 and '95 Virtual Futures conferences. There were strong alliances between like-minds at Birmingham and Warwick: the VF events had involved some of Plant's Birmingham proteges (who appeared at VF95 in their proto-CCRU incarnation Switch), while Plant and Nick Land had actually been creative-and-sexual partners for a couple of years and remained close. With the promise of her very own research center dangled before her, Plant decided to give academia one last shot, and brought many of her Birmingham students with her to form CCRU.

For the first year of its existence, 1995/1996, Cybernetic Culture Research Unit was characterised by "a frantic atmosphere" of interdisciplinary excitement, involving reading groups, lectures series, research-sharing sessions, seminars like 1996's Afro-Futures, and the confrontational journal ****Collapse. There was an exhilirating sense of being at the heart of something new. This first phase of the unit's life climaxed with Virtual Futures 96: Datableed, which was wholly organised by the CCRU (the first two VF's had been put together by postgraduates attached to Professor Benjamin's Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature). Advertised as "an antidisciplinary event" aiming "to explore the smearing of previously discrete cultural spheres", VF96 alternated DJ sessions with sound-and-vision enhanced talks by a diverse range of guests--theorist Manuel De Landa, journalists Steve Beard and Mark Sinker, SF writer Pat Cadigan, and cyberfeminist Linda Dement, to name just a handful.

By the second year of its existence, tensions emerged between the CCRU-virus and its host, the Philosophy Department. Warwick had expected something closer to traditional notions of cyberculture: Internet studies, basically. But what actually took shape reflected Plant and Land's interest in hooking up cybernetics in the original Norbert Wiener sense (information flows, dissolving the difference between living and non-living systems) to compatible elements of Deleuze & Guattari (schizo-analysis, machinic desire, the biomechanical continuum of material reality), plus chaos, complexity and connection theory. "Cyber", as CCRU conceived it, also connoted "cyberpunk": the theory-fiction goal of academic writing that rivalled the hallucinatory rush you got from Neuromancer and Blade Runner.

Warwick clearly got more than it bargained for. Benjamin admits to having "mixed feelings about what Sadie and Nick do", professes to be mystified by "the meaningless term" that is cyber-theory, and keenly stresses the fact that CCRU and the Philosophy Department "are quite separate things". One of Benjamin's administrative colleagues notes drily that "very little" CCRU work "was published in philosophy journals." For her part, Sadie Plant emphasises the practical problems caused by the CCRU students' interdisciplinary approach, like "the need for external examiners.... It would have suited us to be able to just sweep all that away, but it's not so easy."

CCRU are less diplomatic, railing against "disciplinary templates" that obstruct "real research". "You're not allowed to follow these things where they want to go," says Mark Fisher, a cleancut young man who speaks with an evangelical urgency and agitated hand gestures. "You're not allowed to find anything out.... Because who would mark it?!". He cites the example of the PhD work of CCRU's Suzanne Livingston, which was challenged by one Philosophy Department member on the grounds--"what's neurology got to do with capitalism?".

After Plant left, CCRU embarked upon a second phase of trying "to occupy the university" and create a "non-disciplinary" atmosphere by forging links with postgraduates in the Mathematics and Science departments. But this petered out "with no real engagement". The final breaking point came with the Fall '97 Virotechnics conference, which CCRU decided to hold off campus at a media conference center in Wolverhampton, 35 miles from Warwick. According to CCRU, Nick Land effectively had to resign his lecturer's job in order to attend Virotechnics. "Nick had to cancel a simultaneously scheduled seminar at the university, hastily set up as an opportunity for him to explain the increasingly perplexing direction of CCRU's research", explains CCRU's Steve Goodman. Every couple of years, the staff of university departments make an assessment of the publications the

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department has produced. Since the kind of work Land and his proteges were producing was not considered philosophy, and therefore not counted in any departmental assessment, Land felt obliged to resign, effective the end of the academic year.

Virotechnics was the culmination of the unit's second-phase attempt "to rigorise a kind of diagrammatic study programme in the university," says Land, referring to CCRU's alloy of science and philosphy. "That was really not acceptable, it's fair to say, to the Philosophy Department. So the third phase is take that programme outside the university." While CCRU members continue to finish their PhD's and teach, they regard these activities as " lower-order intensity"; the real action takes place at the Leamington HQ. "There's nothing more unproductive than engaging in this lifelong struggle to get intensity into the academy," says an exasperated Fisher. "It's hopeless and thankless." He maintains that the Philosophy Dept's attitude to CCRU ranges from "outright hostile" to "embarassment", but the general strategy "is to wait for it to die rather than to actively kill it."

Nick Land is the kind of "vortical machine" (to use a fave CCRU trope) around which swirl all manner of outlandish and possibly apocryphal stories. Didya hear about the phase Nick went through only talking in numbers? Or the time he was taken over by three distinct entities? True or not, there's no deying the fact that, as Lecturer in Continental Philosophy, Dr Land has been a "strange attractor" luring students to Warwick purely through his personal reputation. A colleague who sat in on Land classes in the early Nineties remembers both his "impressive pedagogic commitment" and his charisma. "Despite his diffident, tentative way of suggesting things, Nick had a real presence.... It was conspicuous that his gang of groupies did fall apart during his sabbatical term."

The Thirst For Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism, Land's sole book-length publication to date, is a remarkable if deranged mix of prose-poem, spiritual autobiography and rigorous explication of the implications of Bataille's thought (if taken seriously, comparable to "syphilis of the mind"). Prefiguring CCRU's struggles with university bureaucracy, the book drips with anti-academic bile, occasionally spilling over into flagellating self-disgust. Philosophy itself is castigated as "the excruciation of libido". Thirst For Annihilation's polymathically perverse range of learning (thermodynamics, cyclone formation, the Menger sponge), and phrases like "vortex of vulvo-cosmic dissolution" that blend scientific language with darkside mysticism, anticipate the CCRU's work.

In the early Nineties, Land was wont to describe himself as a "professor of delirial engineering", recalls the colleague. He also went through a "glorious phase in which he offered millenial prophecies for the next global meltdown in world markets, a deduction based on past such cycles. It rather smacked of an infatuation with the power of numbers."

As much chaos magician as chaos theorist, Land is said to be thoroughly versed in the gamult of occult knowledge and parapsychology: the I Ching, Current 93 (Aleister Crowley's kundalini-like energy force), Kabbalist numerology, H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, and the eschatological cosmology of Terence McKenna (a neo-hippy evangelist for plant-based hallucinogens like psilocybin and DMT). Much of CCRU's thought seems to emanate from an uncanny interzone between science and superstition. (Both of which appeal to rigorous method, of course.)

After reading Thirst For Annihilation's valedictory salute to "the saints, shamans, werewolves, vampires, and lunatics with whom I have communed,", and his self-description in ***Collapse as "a palsied mantis constructed from black jumpers and secondhand Sega circuitry, stalking the crumbling corridors of academe systematically extirpating all humanism", I expected Land to be an emaciated and eldritch figure. Stick insect thin, he is. But Land's gentle voice and impishly twinkling eyes make him closer to a playgroup leader than a dark magus. He and the CCRU crew ply me with endless cups of tea while explaining the curious diagrams on the walls.

There's a chart that synthesises Kabbalah's Tree of Life with H.P. Lovecraft, and is related to a magickal system called tangential tantra. "Instead of summoning or invoking, you're setting up a magical event that will be cut across from the forces of the Outside, so unanticipated events will happen," explains Land. Another poster--influenced by J.G. Ballard's concept of "deep time" as outlined in his catastrophe novel The Drowned World--depicts a cross section of the human spine, with different vertebrae aligned to different phases of human prehistory. And there's a chart that divides human history into a series of periods--"the primitive socius, the despotic state, capitalism" --culminating in a post-human phase named "Unuttera", which I learn refers to "The Entity or polytendriled abomination" at the End of Time.

The most recent diagram represents the culmination of CCRU's forays into the occult numerological techniques of digital reduction and triangular numbering. A spiral bisected by a number scale that descends from 9 to one, the diagram looks rather ordinary. But as CCRU explain its implications to me at considerable length (something to do with allowing them to understand "concepts as number systems) it becomes clear they sincerely believe it contains something on a par with the secret of

the universe. The 9-spiral mandala--the Barker Scale, they call it--is the end-product of CCRU's determination to abandon "the fuzziness of discursive articulation" (philosophy) and move into "a much crisper, more rigorous and productive diagrammatic style", says Land. ("Crisp and rigorous" is one of his favourite phrases, despite the stress it puts on his weak 'R').

The diagram was a gift from "Professor Barker". Inspired by Professor Challenger--the Conan-Doyle anti-hero reinvented by Deleuze & Guattari in "The Geology of Morals" section of A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia--Barker appears to be a sort of imaginary mentor who hips the CCRU to various cosmic secrets. "But we'd be a bit reluctant to say 'imaginary' now, wouldn't we?," cautions Land with a mischievous glint in his eye. "We've learned as much--well, vastly more from Professor Barker --than supposedly 'real' pedagogues!". As CCRU's "avatar", Barker has revealed the "Geo-Cosmic Theory of Trauma". Following the materialist lead of Deleuze & Guattari, human culture is analysed as just another set of strata on a geocosmic continuum. From the chemistry of metals to the non-linear dynamics of the ocean, from the cycles of capitalism to the hyper-syncopated breakbeat rhythms of jungle, the cosmos is an "unfolding traumascape" governed by self-similar patterns and fundamental processes that recur on every scale.

Libidinising "flows" and investing them with an intrinsically subversive power,
Deleuze & Guattari have been criticised as incorrigible Romantics. CCRU develop this element of A Thousand Plateaus into a kind of mystic-materialism. Discussing what CCRU call "Gothic Materialism" ("ferro-vampiric" cultural activity which flirts with the inorganic and walks the "flatline" between life and death), Anna Greenspan talks about how "the core of the earth is made of iron, and blood contains iron", about how the goal is to "hook up with the Earth's metal plasma core, which is the Body-Without-Organs". Body-without-Organs (B-w-O) is the Deleuzian utopia, an inchoate flux of deterritorialised energy; Greenspan says they take the B-w-O as "an ethical injunction", a supreme goal.

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O[rphan] D[frift>] also talk about "metal in the body" and seeking the B-w-O. Another Land-influenced theory-fiction collective, O[rphan] D[frift>] are CRRU's prime allies: they performed at VF96 and are staging an event in collaboration with CCRU/Switch at London's Beaconsfield Arts Centre, October of this year. Maggie Roberts and Ranu Mukherjee, the core of OD, originally met as Fine Art students at the prestigious-but-conservative Royal College, where their ideas about creating a form of multimedia-based synaesthetic terrorism oriented around "schizoid thinking", pre-linguistic autistic states and man-machine interfaces proved way too radical. Formed in late 1994, OD was shaped by two mindblowing experiences: "experimentation with drugs and techno", and a 1993 encounter with Nick Land.

"Before CCRU started at Warwick, Nick latched onto us very intensively for a while," says Roberts. "We fed him image experience, tactile readings of the stuff he was buried in theoretically. He wanted his writing to kick in a much more experiential way. For us, there was something wonderful about having a man you could ring up and ask: 'what's radiation?', 'what's a black hole?'".

OD's collective debut was a multimedia installation at London's Cabinet Gallery. What began as a catalogue for the show escalated into an astonishing 437 page book, Cyberpositive. Like Plant's Zeros + Ones, Cyberpositive is a swarm-text of sampled writings that aren't attributed in the text. But where Plant offers footnotes; OD merely list the "asked" and "un-asked" contributors at the end. Published in 1995, Cyberpositive serves as a sort of canon-defining primer for the CCRU intellectual universe, placing SF and cyberpunk writers on the same level as post-structuralist theorists. "We treat Burroughs as clearly as important a thinker as any notional theorist," says Nick Land, "At the same time, every great philosopher is producing an important fiction. Marx is obviously a science fiction writer." For her part, Sadie Plant regards the Eighties cyberpunk novelists like Gibson and Cadigan as "more reliable witnesses", precisely because, unlike theorists, "they don't have an axe to grind".

The most highly-charged passages in Cyberpositive are the hefty chunks of Plant/Land writing and Roberts's and Mukherjee's evocations of the techno-rave-Ecstasy-LSD experience. "I used to write a lot in clubs, which probably looked really pretentious," recalls Roberts. "Tracing what's happening in all the different sound channels and what they're doing spatially and physically to you". The language veers from masochistic mortification of the flesh ("deep hurting techno", "the meat is learning to know loss") to imagery influenced by voodoo and shamanic possession ("white darkness", "the fog of absolute proximity", "psyclone", "beautiful fear"). "It's trying to process the dissassembling of the self," says Roberts. "Maybe what you're calling abject, we'd call melting. The violence of the sounds in techno, it's like you're being turned inside out, smeared, penetrated."

Despite her facial piercing and techno-pagan accoutrements, Roberts has a sort of burned-out, aristocratic air that suggests Marianne Faithfull circa 1969. A half-smile flickering on her lips, as if

she's privy to some kosmik joke, Roberts speaks in a faded falter--as though some unutterably alien zone of posthuman consciousness hasn't quite relinquished its hold. Which may be a pretty accurate description of the state of play. If CCRU have something of a cultic air about them, OD go a lot further. Combining Mayan cosmology with ideas about Artificial Intelligence, they sem to believe that humanity will soon abandon the "meat" of incarnate existence and become pure spirit. Throughout Cyberpositive there's the recurrent exhortation "we must change for the machines"; while the book ends with the declaration--"human viewpoint redundant."

Not only do OD reckon Charles Manson had some good ideas, their East London HQ contains several cages of snakes--proof of their determination to get really serious about voodoo rites. The obsession was sparked by Gibson's Count Zero, in which cyberspace has spontaneously generated entities equivalent to the loa (the spirit-gods of voudun cosmology). Throughout the interview, a shaven-headed OD member called Rich sits with baby boa constrictors wrapped around his body. His other contribution to the evening is to make some sandwiches--daintily quartered, but containing peanut butter mixed with sardines. "Too radical for me", I confess after one nibble. Rich's eyes light up triumphantly: Mind-Game Over.

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"Cyberpositive" was originally the title of an essay by Sadie Plant and Nick Land. First aired at the 1992 drug culture symposium Pharmakon, "Cyberpositive" was a gauntlet thrown down at the Left-wing orthodoxies that still dominate British academia. The term "cyberpositive" was a twist on Norbert Wierner's ideas of "negative feedback" (homeostasis), and "positive feedback" (runaway tendencies, vicious circles). Where the conservative Wiener valorized "negative feedback", Plant/Land re-positivized positive feedback--specifically,: the tendency of market forces to generate disorder and destabilise control structures.

"It was pretty obvious that a theoretically Left-leaning critique could be maintained quite happily but it wasn't ever going to get anywhere," says Plant. "If there was going to be scope for any kind of....not 'resistance', but any kind of discrepancy in the global consensus, then it was going to have to come from somewhere else." That elsewhere was certain passages in A Thousand Plateaus where Deleuze & Guattari suggest that, in Plant's words, "you don't try and slow things down, you encourage them to go fast as possible. Which was interestingly connected to Marx's ideas about capitalism sweeping away the past. So we got into this stance of 'oh well, let it sweep away! Maybe it should sweep away faster'." Other crucial influences were neo-Deleuzian theorist Manuel De Landa's idea of "capitalism as the system of antimarkets", and, says Plant, historian-of-everyday-life Fernand Braudel's conception of capitalism as "an amalgam of would-be free market forces and state/ corporate/centralised control functions. So there isn't really any such thing called 'capitalism', it's just a coincidence of those two really extreme and opposed tendencies."

Plant and the CCRU enthuse about bottom-up, grass-roots, self-organising activity: street markets, "the frontier zones of capitalism", what De Landa calls "meshwork", as opposed to corporate, top-down capitalism. It all sounds quite jovial, the way they describe it now--a bustling bazaar culture of trade and "cutting deals". But "Cyberpositive" actually reads like a nihilistic paean to the "cyberpathology of markets", celebrating capitalism as "a viral contagion" and declaring "everything cyberpositive is an enemy of mankind". In Nick Land solo essays like "Machinic Desire" and "Meltdown", the tone of morbid glee is intensified to an apocalyptic pitch. There seems to be a perverse and literally anti-humanist identification with the "dark will" of capital and technology, as it "rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities". In "Meltdown", Land declares: "Man is something for it to overcome: a problem, drag".

This gloating delight in capital's deterritorialising virulence is the CCRU's reaction to the stuffy complacency of Left-wing academic thought; a sort of rubbing salt in the wounds (as when Land jibes at the "senile spectre" of Socialism, an allusion to The Communist Manifesto). "There's definitely a strong alliance in the academy between anti-market ideas and completely schleroticised, institutionalised thought," says Mark Fisher. "Marx has been outdated by cybernetic theory. It's obvious that capitalism isn't going to be brought down by its contradictions. Nothing ever died of contradictions!". Exulting in capitalism's permanent "crisis mode", CCRU believe in the strategic application of pressure to accelerate the tendencies towards chaos. The real struggle, says Fisher in fluent Deleuzian, is within capitalism and between "homogenisation processes and nomadic distribution.".

What feels from any everyday human perspective like catastrophic change is really anastrophe: not the past coming apart, but "the future coming together". Where Land gives this idea a millenial spin (he's described capitalism as "an invasion from the future", a virus retrochronically triggered by some kind of artificial intelligence to create the conditions for its own assembling--an idea that reads like it was spawned by watching Terminator on acid), Plant's attitude is more humanely ambivalent. In the mid-Eighties, for instance, she supported the Coal Miner's strike, a revolt against

Thatcherite modernising policies and an attempt to preserve a traditional working class culture. Since then, she has come to believe that the privatisation and anti-welfare policies pursued by the Conservative goverment in the 1980s really did constitute "a revolution". She talks approvingly of the end of "the dependency culture", arguing that this helped catalyse the Nineties upsurge of British pop culture, fashion and art.

"Obviously it is painful for any particular community that ends up on the scrapheap of history", Plant says, looking appropriately pained. "But I've got a far more evolutionary view of history these days. Just as particular species or ecosystems flourish and die, so do human cultures". In the face of this "reality", she argues, the British Left is comparable with the Church of England: "Every so often it comes out and makes some moral statement about how terrible things are, but what's it going to do about it? Nothing."

Many Left-wing theorists would retaliate by arguing that the Plant/Land/CCRU pro-market stance is merely an intellectual accomodation to "realities" imposed by top-down corporate forces; that by mapping techniques appropriate for natural phenonema (chaos theory, non-linear dynamics) onto capitalism, they've effectively naturalized the free market, resulting in a kind of post-Deleuzian version of Social Darwinism. Judith Williamson--Professor of Cultural History at Middlesex University, and writer for the left-leaning newspaper The Guardian--accuses the CCRU of "inevitabilism".

"All these excitingly eroticised ideas about the flows of capital absolve one from morality," she says. "Most of capitalism's flows are deeply pernicious." The trouble with inevitablism is that it removes human agency from the picture, complains Williamson. "But human will is not nothing -- there have been these huge acts of courage and altruism throughout history." As neo-Deleuzians devoutly committed to impersonality, agency is precisely what Plant and the CCRU demote. "Nothing takes the credit--or the blame--for either the runaway tendencies at work or the attempts to regulate them," argues Plant in Zeros + Ones. "Political struggles and ideologies have not been incidental to these shifts, but cultures and the changes they undergo are far too complex to be attributed to attempts to make them happen or hold them back".

Williamson is an old sparring partner with Plant, Land and CCRU, having had several public fights with them at various academic events. The author of Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture, Williamson belongs to an earlier, Marx-influenced phase of British cultural theory, so the the clash between her and CCRU is partly generational. Recalling a famous spat in the bar of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, she recalls finding it "spooky that Nick Land and all these people spoke as one. You could not get 20 of my postgrad students in a room and have them agree with me. I find that scary--that messianic quality, like they've got the message"...A lot of what they say reminds me of tripping experiences, where you have that feeling that everything coheres and makes sense."

Another Williamson accusation--that CCRU lift ideas from chaos and complexity that describe material process but "apply them in a metaphorical way... as if using a concrete thing for a metaphor makes it not be a metaphor"--would especiallly infuriate CCRU. Metaphor, figurative language, the whole realm of representation and ideology: these are the enemy, as far as CCRU are concerned. "Our analysis is materialist, rather than ideological," says Goodman, "Whether the scale is geological, oceanic, socio-cultural, there are parallels going on at every scale". Despite drawing a lot from post-structuralism's assault upon the sovereign ego, CCRU detest deconstruction, precisely because of its treatment of the text as a cosmology and everything as metaphor. "The only thing that's powerful about books--their ability to plug into other machines outside themselves-- is completely destroyed by treating them as this macro-interiority that spreads over everything," spits Fisher, co-author of the hilarious and coruscating Abstract Culture rant "Pomophobia".

Hungry for intellectual reasons-to-be-cheerful, CCRU simultaneously renounce postmodernism's wan fatalism (the idea that we're at the end of everything) and the guilt-wracked impotence of the Left (Fisher talks, cyborg-style, about the relief of having "the false memory-chip of Socialist authenticity" removed from his brain). In the process, they've jettisoned the concept of "alienation" in both its Marxist and Freudian senses. They speak approvingly of "surplus value", sublimation and commodity-fetishism as creative tendencies. Where "Cyberpositive" noted how how runaway capitalism had accessed "inconceivable alienations", CCRU's collective essay "Swarmachines" goes further and climaxes with the boast: "alienated and loving it".

The idea, says Fisher, comes from a mix-and-blend of Lyotard and Blade Runner--"the proletariat as this synthetic class, of a revolution that's on the side of the synthetic and artificial. The concept of 'alienation' depends on the notion that there's some authentic essence lost through the development of capitalism. But according to Barker's Geo-Cosmic theory of trauma, everything's already synthetic." If reality really is a bio-mechanical continuum, there's no reason to resist capitalism's escalating dynamic of anti-naturalism: addiction to hyper-stimulus, the creation of artificial desires.

Willamson condes that "if there's one thing that's quite endearing about CCRU, it's the search for a kind of optimism.... Today it's very hard to have those sort of Sixties feelings of 'oh God, things are exciting, things can get better, new things can happen'". The mania of CCRU's texts--a mood-blend of euphoric anticipatioin and dystopian dread that Mark Dery called "dysphoria"--is certainly contagious. "A lot of things are exciting, but is it true?," cautions Williamson. "Music is a good parallel--you don't think 'this music explains the universe' just because you finds it charges you up". Again, the CCRU would fervently disagree. "The musical model is really key to us," says Land. "It's absurd to say that music doesn't represent the real and therefore it's an empty metaphor. Every theorist who hasn't a real place for music ends up with one-dimensional melancholia."

Not only do the CCRU derive a lot of their energy from music--specifically, the British rave genre of jungle a/k/a drum & bass--but popular culture is where their ideas seem most persuasive. Right from its late Eighties beginnings, rave culture's motor has been anarcho-capitalist and entrepreneurial: from promoters throwing illegal parties in warehouses and fields, to drug dealing. Even after its co-optation by the record and clubbing industries, rave music's cutting edge comes from the grass-roots: small labels, cottage-industry producers with home studios, specialist record stores, pirate radio.

Sadie Plant attributes these bottom-up economic networks to the end of dependency culture, forcing people "to get real and find some ways of surviving" but also to invent "new forms of collectivity" (the micro-utopian communality of the rave).

As a postgraduate in Manchester, Plant was swept up in that city's legendary 1988-90 rave scene. Currently, she's co-running a jungle club in Birmingham called Kleptomania, for which she creates back-projections involving "video feedback", an "orgasmically beautiful" effect that makes "everything looks like it's come from another world". Plant is also writing about book about the interface between drugs and technology. CCRU has a musical sub-component, Ko-Labs, engaged in making jungle tracks. The unit's latest recruit is Jessica Edwards, a researcher who has no affiliation with Warwick University whatsoever, but who used to be a professional dancer at raves and recently completed an undergraduate thesis entitled "Mapping the Liminal- Pentecostalism, Shamanism and Drum & Bass".

Despite being rave theorists and "sub-bass materialists", CCRU are surprisingly cagey when the topic of drugs is introduced. Acknowledging the cyborgizing, viral usefulness of drugs--as anorganic elements that enter the nervous system and engineer precise changes in consciousness--Land nonetheless resists the "relapse into a biographical narrative". Anna Greenspan talks of the negative "crash-and-burn" syndrome caused by drug abuse, and says the CCRU are more interested in building sustained plateaus of intensity. One outcrop of this is Suzanne Livingston's research into "long term rewiring of perception"--techniques of flash and flicker that restructure the brain, as already used by advertising, MTV, and rave promoters (lights, lazers and strobes).

As well as being galvanised by music, the CCRU are also influenced by the theory-driven leading edge of music journalism. One of their associate members is Kodwo Eshun, contributor to magazines like iD and The Wire and author of the forthcoming More Brilliant Than The Sun, a study of "sonic fiction" in black music from Sun Ra to jungle. He was guest of honour at CCRU's Afro-Futures seminar and gave a talk at VF96. Eshun describes himself and the CCRU as "concept-engineers", as opposed to thinkers. Critique, he argues, is a rhetorical mode that puts the heavy burden of History on your shoulders, whereas the concept-engineer is into speculation. "Most theory contextualises, historicizes and cautions; the concept-engineer uses theory to excite and ignite," Eshun proclaims. Where "thinker" evokes an effete and impotent ivory-tower detachment, "engineer" suggests someone who gets down-and-dirty with the material word (in Deleuzian terms, someone who operates and maintains desiring machines). Like a DJ or jungle producer, the concept-engineer is "a sample-finder": s/he's free to suspend belief in the ultimate truth-value of a theory and simply use the bits that work, in the spirit of Deleuze & Guattari's offering up of A Thousand Plateaus as tool-kit rather than gospel.

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"Concept-engineer" is a good tag for the outerzone of "independent researchers" and amateur autodidacts to which CCRU is connected. Renegade theorists like Howard Slater, a Deleuze-freak whose techno-zine Break/Flow brilliantly analyses rave music in terms of "nonconceptual thought" and "impulsional exchanges", and celebrates the techno underground as a rhizomatic, insubordinate, post-media economy. And like Matthew Fuller, a media theorist/activist with a background in anarchist politics and links to the hacker underground. Fuller's CV of cultural dissidence includes flypostering, pirate radio, a non-Internet bulletin board called Fast Breeder, the scabrous freesheet Underground, and a series of anarcho-seminars like "Seizing The Media" dedicated to the theory and praxis of media terrorism. Fuller also put out the anthology Unnatural: Techno-Theory For A Contaminated Culture, which included Plant/Land's "Cyberpositive" and an essay by CCRU member

Steve Metcalf.

Discussing his own cyber-theory writings, Fuller talks about dismantling traditional "modes of political address" and developing a sort of post-ideological realpolitik of resistance. A true concept-engineer, he believes in ransacking theory texts for task-specific ideas. "Publishers like Autonomedia and Semiotexte produce material that you don't have to be an academic to get into, so it circulates outside those milieux. When I give presentations at academic events, it's easy to see I'm in a more powerful position than the academics--I can steal all the advantages of their discipline, plus do something else with it that fucks it up totally."

Noting that Deleuze & Guattari are already being institutionalised into "the most dreary, saintly area of discourse", Fuller says he's dedicated to "cracking open those texts again, thinkers who originally opened stuff up to delirium and the irrational. I mix up different linguistic registers and narrative strategies so that the text writhes in the hands of the reader, so to speak. In that respect, there's a lot more to be learned from fiction than theory." Here Fuller chimes in with Sadie Plant, whose work-in-progress, Writing On Drugs, includes a fictional component. Plant says she hopes that subsequent books will become "pure fiction".

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"The most enjoyable aspect of CCRU is that they are a gang -- PhD students with attitude!," says Eshun. Loathing the "necrotic side of philosphy, the chewing-over of dead thinkers' entrails", and bored limp by the "delibidinising" atmosphere of seminars, CCRU used to attend academic events, claims Eshun, expressly "in order to disrupt, undermine and ridicule.... They'd get into pitched battles with Derrideans!". Enhancing this picture of intra-academic gang-warfare, two of CCRU's allies from another university once turned up to an event sporting "colors": they'd printed up T-Shirts that mimicked the logo of Dolce & Gabbana, but stood for Deleuze & Guattari!

Weary of such sports, Plant, Land and CCRU have all enthusiastically embraced the idea of escaping "institutional lockdown" by going freelance. In addition to her drugs book, Plant is working on a film screenplay and says she can't imagine ever returning to academia. The CCRU hope to become a kind of independent think-tank, selling "commodities" on the intellectual free market--like their strikingly designed Abstact Culture (each "swarm" consists of five separate monographs bundled together) and, in the future, CD's, CD-ROM's and books. "The whole saga of the first phase of the CCRU was to do with negotiating bureaucratic space," says Fisher. "But we quickly realised that the institution didn't depend on university space itself , but on the collectivity."

It seems unlikely, however, that Plant and her erstwhile cronies will rejoin forces once they're out in the freemarket wilderness. Some kind of ideological rift seems to have occurred. Plant says she couldn't really go along with the trip into numerical mysticism, not least because she didn't like finding herself "in the role of the sensible, conservative one --not a role I'm used to!". CCRU, for their part, seem to have resented her premature departure from Warwick. Perhaps CCRU's fervent emphasis on collectivity stems in part from what Kodwo Eshun characterises as "an adaption to this harsh feeling of abandonment by this person who they really admired and who they decided to devote three, four years of their lives around." Plant, meanwhile, says she felt uncomfortable with being a guru figure.

"Nick's hermetic, he wants acolytes", says Eshun. "Whereas Sadie's this total communicator. Zeros + Ones is the return of the grand narrative with a vengeance. I can't think of any other writer with the same ambition. Sadie wants the world and I think she'll get it. " CCRU, meanwhile, are toying with the idea of relocating wholesale to India.

Posted by SIMON REYNOLDS at 12:18 PM

22 comments:

Pete Um said...

Bloody useful, ta.

January 26, 2010 at 2:56 PM

Martyn Amos said...

This takes me back... I was tangentially involved with the CCRU via my research in molecular computing (I did my Ph.D at Warwick '93-'96), and helped with the two "big" VF conferences.

One of the last times I saw Nick was in the Coop on Earlsdon high street; in his basket were about six Pot Noodles, and a cabbage ("because I don't want to get scurvy").

May 29, 2011 at 8:27 AM

Stephen Alexander said...

Those interested in NL and this period at Warwick,
might like to see the following post in which I give my take on it ...
http://torpedotheark.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/nick-land-and-dark-enlightenment.html?m=1

August 3, 2017 at 5:25 AM

Stephen Alexander said...

Readers interested in Land and this period at Warwick, might like to see the following post on torpedo the ark ...

http://torpedotheark.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/nick-land-and-dark-enlightenment.html?m=1

August 3, 2017 at 5:45 AM

Joan Broadhurst said...

Just to say that Andrew Benjamin had nothing to do with the Virtual Futures 94 & 95 conferences. They were student led and funded as had been the Deleuze conference 2 years earlier.

March 27, 2018 at 6:24 AM

Unknown said...

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February 6, 2019 at 5:44 AM

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